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of Human
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(517) 373-7394

Articles in Today's Clips

Monday, March 27, 2006

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State's child abuse-prevention efforts falter

Monday, March 27, 2006

By Sharon Emery

Booth News Lansing Bureau

LANSING -- Budget cuts, staff shortages and growing needs among financially struggling families have forced Michigan's child welfare system to all but abandon abuse and neglect prevention efforts and instead focus on cases where children already have been harmed, child advocates say.

They point to the reduction of some \$15 million in annual spending on key family preservation and prevention programs between 2000 and 2006, even as the state's economy tanked and investigated cases of abuse and neglect increased to more than 72,000 last year.

Six out of every 100 Michigan children now live in a home investigated for potential abuse or neglect.

At the same time, Department of Human Services caseworkers were among state employees cut in money-saving moves; child protective services remains 130 caseworkers short, DHS officials say.

The result is a bottom-line litmus test of whether the state gets involved in a case, advocates say. "Cases that are marginal -- worrisome, but not abusive or neglectful -- just get screened out," said Sandra Frein, a member of UAW Local 6000, which represents caseworkers statewide, and a long-time child protective services caseworker in Ottawa County.

"Think about it: If you have one case where there are some vague concerns about the home but no allegations, and then another case of a child with a black eye, which child are you going to assign (to your caseload)?"

DHS Director Marianne Udow insists that prevention efforts remain a key priority. She cites the 39 family resource centers in schools throughout the state that bring caseworkers into direct contact with families.

But she acknowledges that things aren't what they used to be.

"Staff are strained to do prevention services -- there's no question, they're not able to do as much as they'd like to," Udow said. "But when budgets get cut, prevention is one of those things you cut. That's so short-sighted."

The long-term effects of abuse and neglect are well-documented, advocates say: physical impairment, mental problems such as depression and lack of impulse control, low self-esteem, post-traumatic stress disorder.

Citing the need for prevention measures, state Attorney General Mike Cox last week called for legislation to require protective services workers to investigate any home with children where

police have responded to a domestic violence complaint. He noted studies show strong links between domestic violence and child abuse.

"I don't know how we can have a child welfare system that can turn away from this service," Cox said.

As for the additional caseworkers likely needed, he said that was for lawmakers and DHS to work out.

Gov. Jennifer Granholm has called for 51 more CPS workers in her 2007 budget proposal, which lawmakers are considering. Her budget doesn't include additional funding for prevention programs, advocates say.

Several key family preservation and abuse prevention programs now run solely on federal funds, including Families First and Strong Families/Safe Children, according to the advocacy group Michigan's Children.

But even the federal money -- funded through the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families program -- is threatened by new federal rules that require states to ensure that 50 percent of the people receiving cash assistance are working or in training. With Michigan's work-participation rate at around 23 percent, prevention funds likely will be redirected, child advocates fear. One of the most popular programs under siege is the Zero to Three Secondary Prevention program, which operates in 44 counties -- down from 63 -- and requires a 25 percent local funding match.

K.P. Pelleran, state director of Fight Crime: Invest in Kids Michigan, which represents 298 police officials statewide, recently pleaded with lawmakers to reinstate money for the program. It funds local services, such as home visits, parenting classes and child care, to families with children 3 and younger at risk of abuse or neglect.

"As the debate continues for the need to increase the number of child protective service workers and foster care placements, one cannot overlook the fact that in order to qualify for such state services, children must first be abused or neglected," Pelleran said in a statement. "That is the saddest qualifier for these limited state services."

Once funded in the state budget at nearly \$8 million, the program is now down to \$4.8 million. It's frustrating for caseworkers and child advocates who insist that with a little support from the state, struggling families could be rescued from falling into abuse or neglect. And children could be spared the suffering.

Seventy percent of kids in the state's child welfare system are there because they were neglected, not because they were physically or sexually abused. That means their parents "failed to provide" -- food, clothing, shelter, supervision.

And while there's no definitive cause and effect, a prevailing commonality in neglect cases is poverty: Parents just making it economically are likely just making it when it comes to providing for their kids as well.

The upshot is that poor parents ultimately may have their children taken away simply because they are poor, advocates charge.

"The line between neglect and poverty needs to be clarified," said Pat Sorenson, of Michigan's Children. "With no support services, families are falling more deeply into poverty."

She worries about efforts by Republican lawmakers to cut off cash assistance for families after four years.

"We can't have a debate on welfare reform without also looking at child welfare," Sorenson said. "Two of every three people on cash welfare in this state are kids. We need to have that discussion: Is it good policy to be putting kids at risk because we're not willing to support families that we perceive are not trying to help themselves?"

The cash assistance grant has been stuck since 1993 at an average of \$459 a month for a mom and two kids.

The issue flared up at a recent budget hearing when Rep. Bruce Caswell, R-Hillsdale, noted that a reoccurrence of abuse or neglect is 10 times more likely when children are reunited with their families than when they are placed in foster homes. He concluded that relative care may be "much more dangerous."

An indignant Rep. George Cushingberry, a Democrat from Detroit, retorted that social welfare programs have been reduced so severely that it's no wonder problems result when children are reunited with their economically struggling families. He cited in particular lawmakers' failure to raise the cash assistance grant.

"So if you put these children back in the home that was always poor ... where they've had trouble providing heat, food, water ... that ends up being neglect," Cushingberry said.

Many of the problems facing Michigan families were created by the Legislature itself, he said. "This system is grossly underfunded, and if you want to finally face that, then you have to say, Let's get some extra funding for these programs."

Prevention funding declines

Kalamazoo Gazette

Monday, March 27, 2006

Budget cuts have sliced family-preservation and child-abuse-prevention programs in recent years:

Families First \$21.4 \$17.4 -19%

Strong Families /Safe Children \$16.9 \$13.4 -21%

0-3 Secondary Prevention \$7.75 \$4.8 -38%

Child Protection/Community Partners \$7 \$5.8 -17%

Child Safety/Permanency Plans \$20.6 \$16.9 -18%

Source: Department of Human Services and Michigan's Children

Let's look for answers on child abuse, neglect

Blacks disproportionately represented

Monday, March 27, 2006

Ann Arbor News editorial

It's easy to shrug off statistics. But when the numbers represent children, we need to think long and hard before we turn away. Black children in Michigan are more likely than their white counterparts to be victims of abuse and neglect. They are three times more likely to be placed outside their family home, and they are more likely to stay there longer than white children, according to a recent state task force report. If such facts sound familiar, all the more reason they need the light of day.

Last week, The Ann Arbor News Lansing Bureau reported a number of disturbing findings from Michigan's advisory committee on the over-representation of children of color in child welfare. Here's a glaring one: Blacks in trouble with the law are 88 percent more likely than white teens to be arrested and 97 percent less likely to be put into a diversion program. If we've seen similar information concerning past patterns of outcomes in the justice system, we should be asking why.

That's what legislators did when they called on the Department of Human Services to identify reasons. Others must be asking such questions elsewhere. Nationally, the child welfare system serves a disproportionate number of minorities. In Washtenaw County, 55 percent of the 253 children in foster care are black. Only 13 percent of the county's population is black, according to Census 2000. Poverty gets blamed for much of the physical neglect of the young. So does racism.

After the task force released its report, Marianne Udow, DHS director, reacted carefully to a report suggestion that inadvertent discrimination by people in the child welfare system played a role in the negative numbers. Udow noted that the notion offended state workers who helped decide whether to remove a child from an abusive home, and she said overt racism is not involved.

But other questions linger. Are all children in the state system getting a fair chance? Is the state too focused on short-term solutions to abuse? Are families truly being empowered to provide proper care for children? Answers may be elusive. Still, taxpayers should care about getting positive results for children coming through crisis situations. Those adult Michigan residents are paying the bill for the system.

When 18 percent of Michigan's child population represents more than 50 percent of the kids under state protection for abuse and neglect, the circumstances of these black children can't be ignored. Let's keep a light on the problem and think of solutions for children who didn't create it.

Published March 27, 2006

Legislators going after Ricky's case files

2 will ask attorney general to overrule state ombudsman

Lansing State Journal

Associated Press

Members of a special state House committee plan to ask the attorney general to rule on whether they should get records in the death of a 7-year-old boy.

The state's children's ombudsman has refused to turn over the case files in the death of Ricky Holland, whose adoptive parents are accused of killing him last summer.

Lawmakers on the committee said they planned to ask Attorney General Mike Cox today for a legal ruling on whether Verlie Ruffin can deny their request for records on the Williamston boy.

Reps. David Law, R-Commerce Township, and Rick Baxter, R-Concord, requested the files under a statute called Arianna's Law. The measure, which took effect in January 2005, expanded the powers of the ombudsman and the Legislature to investigate child abuse cases.

The files contain details of how state Child Protective Services workers responded when school officials and neighbors filed complaints about suspected abuse by Ricky's parents, The Detroit News reported Sunday.

Testimony and court documents have indicated that state workers received several complaints that Ricky was being abused, but did not remove him from his home.

Ruffin, who was named children's ombudsman by Gov. Jennifer Granholm in January, said state laws prevent her from releasing the case files.

She disagrees with the lawmakers' interpretation of Arianna's Law, which is meant to give lawmakers greater access to case files than under powers of subpoena.

"We will be giving a full report to the select subcommittee," Ruffin said.

"We can't release case files, (but) we can release information, and the information will be in the form of a full report."

The ombudsman's denial of the lawmakers' request threatens to "take some of the teeth out of the law that were intended to be there," Law said.

"We need to see (the files) with our own eyes. That would help our committee see what the problems are, where the gaps are and to fix them."

Tim and Lisa Holland are charged with open murder and child abuse in Ricky's death.

The fifth week of testimony in their preliminary examination is to begin Tuesday in Mason.

Sunday, March 26, 2006

Case files on Ricky withheld

House committee will ask Cox to rule on release of confidential data regarding abuse

By Karen Bouffard

The Detroit News

The state children's ombudsman has refused to turn over confidential case files to a special state House of Representatives committee investigating the death of 7-year-old Ricky Holland. Members of the committee plan to ask Attorney General Mike Cox on Monday for a legal ruling on whether Verlie Ruffin can deny their request for records on the Williamston boy, whose adoptive parents are accused of killing him in July 2005.

The father led authorities to Ricky's body in late January.

State Reps. David Law, R-Commerce Township, and Rick Baxter, R-Concord, requested the files under Arianna's Law, which took effect in January 2005.

The law expanded the powers of the ombudsman and the Legislature to investigate child abuse cases.

This is the first time the Republican-controlled Legislature has attempted to use Arianna's Law to investigate a child abuse complaint. The files contain details of how state workers responded when school officials and neighbors filed complaints with Child Protective Services about suspected abuse by Ricky's parents.

Ruffin, who was appointed children's ombudsman by Gov. Jennifer Granholm in January, disagrees with the lawmakers' interpretation of the statute. She said Michigan laws prevent her from releasing the case files.

"We will be giving a full report to the select subcommittee," Ruffin said.

"We can't release case files, (but) we can release information, and the information will be in the form of a full report."

Granholm spokeswoman Liz Boyd said the governor, who has vowed to have her administration investigate Ricky's death, supports Ruffin's decision.

"Under the law that the Legislature passed, decisions regarding the release of confidential information are decisions for the ombudsman and not the governor," Boyd said.

"I trust that the ombudsman has been consulting legal counsel on how to proceed on these issues."

According to the law, the Legislature has greater access to confidential case files than under powers of subpoena.

State Rep. Law said the committee needs full access to Ricky's records to determine how the system failed to protect Ricky.

His parents, Tim and Lisa Holland, have been charged with open murder and child abuse. The fifth week of testimony in their preliminary examination begins Tuesday in Mason, the Ingham County seat.

Testimony and court documents have revealed that state Child Protective Services workers received several complaints that Ricky was being abused, but did not remove him from his home.

Ricky's parents, who also adopted three of his siblings, reported him missing in July, and a massive search ensued.

According to reports, in the months after Ricky disappeared, but before his body was discovered, child protection workers noted signs of abuse on the Holland's four remaining children -- one of whom is their biological child -- but still did not remove them from the home.

The ombudsman's denial of the lawmakers' request will test the power of Arianna's Law to protect children's interests, lawmakers say.

"I'm concerned that (the ombudsman's challenge) might take some of the teeth out of the law that were intended to be there," Law said.

"We need to see (the files) with our own eyes. That would help our committee see what the problems are, where the gaps are and to fix them."

You can reach Karen Bouffard at (734) 462-2206 or kbouffard@detnews.com

Baxter to ask AG for Holland case information held by state

Sunday, March 26, 2006

Jackson Citizen Patriot

Rep. Rick Baxter, R-Concord, will ask Attorney General Mike Cox on Monday to order the release of information pertaining to the Ricky Holland case from Children's Protective Services, a division of the state Department of Human Services, a spokesman announced.

Baxter initially asked the state children's ombudsman, Verlie Ruffian, to release information about the case when Holland's adoptive parents, Tim and Lisa, were charged with murdering the 7-year-old boy.

That request was denied and now Baxter, citing a 2004 law that inhibits lawmakers' ability to get information from the CPS, is asking Cox to make a decision in the matter.

Kids were terrorized at home, police say

Saturday, March 25, 2006

By John Agar

Grand Rapids Press

ALLEGAN -- The children feared being locked in the basement, with the lights off. They were afraid of the dark. In the darkness, they told investigators, a father and grandfather would "do nasty things to them."

Police believe their story: Investigators recovered 8,000 digital images of child pornography. Most, if not all, were of children who live in the home just outside Allegan that housed two families.

Authorities are calling it one of the worst child pornography cases ever in southwest Michigan. Seven children -- ranging in age from 9 months to 8 years -- have been removed, and prosecutors are trying to terminate parental rights. A 9-year-old alleged victim only visited her father on weekends.

"It appears from what we know that there's been generations of abuse," said Margaret Zuzich-Bakker, Allegan County's chief assistant prosecutor.

Three adults are charged with numerous felonies. Two are a father and son from one family in the household.

The 56-year-old is charged with first-and second-degree sexual assault, as well as child sexually abusive activity and using a computer to commit a crime. His 26-year-old son is charged with first-degree sexual assault, attempted first-degree sexual assault and second-degree sexual assault.

From the second family, a man, 73, is charged with child sexually abusive activity and using a computer to commit a crime. He is great-grandfather of the three children in that family.

If convicted, the suspects could get up to life in prison. The Press is withholding their names now to avoid identifying the children.

Police began investigating in mid-February when a school official contacted police with concerns. Sheriff's Detective Chris Koster said with additional charges possible, he didn't want to discuss the case at length, but said it involves "probably some of the most offensive pictures I've ever seen in investigating child-pornography cases."

Court records showed that allegations date to December 2003. Three girls -- two from one family, one from another, all either 8 or 9 -- are named in criminal court records as sexual assault victims. All children except the baby and a 6-year-old girl are listed in Family Court records as potential sexual assault victims.

The child-sexually abusive charges did not specify an alleged victim. Police do not believe any images were put on the Internet and still are investigating if any of the images are of children who don't live in the home.

In court records, Zuzich-Bakker said two 8-year-old girls said they slept in the same bed with the 56-year-old grandfather, even though he had a 1993 conviction for second-degree sexual assault in Van Buren County.

A 6-year-old boy told authorities he was forced by the 26-year-old to have sex with that man's sons, ages 3 and 4, while he watched, Family Court records showed.

Assistant Prosecutor Myrene Koch said in court records that adults were aware the 26-year-old father was molesting the children and did nothing to stop it.

Some of the children said the 56-year-old grandfather "would force them to perform sexual acts on him and each other while he took pictures," Koch wrote.

She said the children showed "very clear signs of physical abuse, including hand marks on the butt of (a girl)." She described the children as "very dirty," with cuts, bruises, possible burns and scratches.

Three girls told police "they would be locked in the basement with no lights on for punishment by all of the adults in the family," records showed.

Rick Hunter, attorney for the 26-year-old, said his client says he is not guilty. Attorneys Patrick Burson, representing the 56-year-old, and Paul Klein, representing the children, declined to comment.

One man in the house is not charged. He and his wife are raising three children, two of whom are listed in court records as sexual assault victims. The 73-year-old suspect is his grandfather, authorities said.

He said he and his wife had no idea that children were victimized or they would have stopped it. He said he did not know the 56-year-old suspect, with whom their oldest child slept, was a sex offender.

He hopes to regain custody of his children at some point, and disputed allegations, the basis for the children's removal from the home, contained in Family Court records.

"There's a lot of stuff that's wrong in there," he said.

The suspects are due in District Court next week for a probable-cause hearing on the criminal charges. Zuzich-Bakker asked to have two girls testify by closed-circuit television, outside of the defendants' presence.

Amos: It's a crime to leave kids alone in cars

Waterford lawmaker introduces legislation to punish parents even if children aren't harmed

Web-posted Mar 25, 2006

By SVEN GUSTAFSON

Of The Oakland Press

Citing a recent case that they say illustrates a loophole in state law, lawmakers and Oakland County Sheriff Michael Bouchard announced legislation Friday that would make leaving children unattended in vehicles a crime.

The legislation, introduced by state Rep. Fran Amos, R-Waterford Township, would penalize parents who leave children under age 6 unattended in an automobile even if the child is not harmed. Previously, police could only pursue criminal charges against parents in such cases if the child died or suffered physical or mental injuries.

Speaking at a news conference at the Oakland County Sheriff's Office, lawmakers used as a reference point a case last month in which Rhonda Louise Sheppard of Troy allegedly left her 2-year-old daughter unattended in her car while she drank with her boyfriend at a bar in Orion Township. Since the child was unharmed, prosecutors could only file a civil neglect petition to review the woman's parenting skills.

"Clearly, there is that void that needs to be fixed," Bouchard said.

The legislation establishes a graduated scale of fines and punishments, starting with a fine of up to \$500 or up to 93 days in jail if the child is uninjured. Parents of unattended children who suffer serious physical harm could face up to 10 years or a \$5,000 fine under the proposal. Amos introduced a similar measure in 2003. She said that the bill's language was overly broad and would possibly have led to arrests against parents who left children unattended to quickly pick up dry cleaning or pay for gas. The current bill allows for so-called reasonable person exemptions where the child is only briefly unattended or remains in sight the whole time.

"That was the difference in the bill, and I didn't want to bring it forward until it was correct and I was comfortable with it," Amos said. Meanwhile, Sheppard's daughter and 11-year-old son, who had been left unattended at home at the time, have been temporarily removed from her custody. A trial is set for May 5.

Sheppard also faces a misdemeanor criminal trial for possession of marijuana, which police say was found on the seat next to the unattended child.

The most notorious case of unattended children in recent years involved Detroit's Tarajee Shaheer Maynor, who is imprisoned for the deaths of her two children after leaving them unattended in 2002 while she visited a Southfield beauty salon. Temperatures that day were in the 80s, and Maynor left the children in a car for more than three hours with the windows rolled up.

According to the Missouri-based advocacy group Kids in Cars, 624 children have died in the United States since 2001 as a result of being left unattended in or around motor vehicles. Amos' legislation also would establish penalties in cases where children die while unattended. "We're trying to make a proactive move here and make sure that we're protecting our kids in all situations," said Rep. David Law, R-Commerce Township, a sponsor of a companion bill.

Help foster youth move to independence

Thursday, March 23, 2006 12:48 PM EST

Petoskey News-Review

Ever thought about what happens to a 17-year-old foster child when she turns 18?

Before advocates for foster system reform came to us recently, we hadn't wondered. Really hadn't crossed our minds.

What happens? They get cut off, turned loose, dropped from state care.

Which of you at 18 was prepared to be fully and totally on your own, with no family support at all? No place to live? No way to get to work? No money? No food?

This is the reality of Michigan's foster youth system. Once children turn 18-years-old, the state no longer pays for their foster care. Families who take these children in are no longer obligated contractually to financially support them. If their biological families are unwilling or incapable of this support, the young people are left with few, if any, options.

Using grants obtained from the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, the Michigan Department of Human Services is developing programs to help foster youth move toward life on their own.

Nationally, the Casey organization has observed that less than 50 percent of foster youth have graduated from high school four years after leaving the care system. For the entire U.S. population ages 18-24, the high school completion rate is 85 percent.

They also note that 25 percent of youth have experienced a period of homelessness within four years of departing foster care, and that 65 percent have not been able to maintain employment for a year.

In Northern Michigan, boards exist in Petoskey, Traverse City and Cadillac, which consist of foster youth who advocate for better opportunities for other foster youth.

Michigan's Casey program also works to line up sources of support for foster youth in the community. Businesses, for example, sometimes give priority hiring consideration to the youth or offer them special promotions. Several colleges have streamlined their enrollment process for Casey participants.

But the grant money from Casey, which is sparking changes to the system, is expiring. We'd like taxpayer resources to pick up where the grant will leave off and continue reforms the Casey program has started, including maintaining the local youth board.

We in Michigan have decided that sometimes children cannot be safe if they live with their biological parents. We take them from people that they may love and place them with strangers. We disrupt their worlds - well-being in mind - and then we turn our backs on them just because they're legally becoming adults?

We ask our legislators to pay serious attention to what these foster children are trying to tell them and to continue the change the Casey program has wrought.

To download an eye-opening publication regarding Michigan foster youth, search on Google for "Michigan foster voice."

Saturday, March 25, 2006

Granholm vetoes adult foster care bills

Associated Press / Detroit News

LANSING -- Democratic Gov. Jennifer Granholm on Friday vetoed bills that would have blocked her administration from setting rules that Republicans say favor unionized adult foster care homes.

About 50,000 Michigan residents live in adult foster care facilities and homes for the aged. The homes care for people over age 60 who can't live alone because of physical impairment or mental illness, but who don't need the level of care given in nursing homes.

Granholm has responded to concerns about the quality of care for residents of the homes by asking the state to review administrative rules regulating assisted-living providers. Rules drafted so far would consider a collective bargaining agreement to be evidence of compliance with certain requirements.

Republicans have said the rules will create onerous "job-killing" regulations that most easily could be met by unionized facilities.

But Granholm wrote in her veto letter that the GOP bills "would foreclose arbitrarily the ability to assure that senior citizens and the disabled are receiving safe and quality care by well-trained and adequately compensated caregivers."

The assisted-living industry supports the legislation, arguing that complying with new rules would cost an extra \$35 million a year.

Sen. Bill Hardiman, R-Kentwood, a sponsor of the legislation, criticized the veto.

"Basically, the administration is suggesting that a collective-bargaining agreement equals quality care and I respectfully disagree," he said in a statement.

The foster care home bills are House Bills 5744-45 and Senate Bills 1026-28.

On the Net:

Michigan Legislature: <http://www.michiganlegislature.org>

Gov. Jennifer Granholm: <http://www.michigan.gov/gov>

Granholm vetoes bills on unionized health facilities

Gongwer News Service

Friday March 24, 2006

Legislation pushed by Republicans who wanted to block rules that could favor unionized group care homes and nursing homes was vetoed Friday by Governor Jennifer Granholm, who said they would have placed arbitrary barriers on the ability of the state to ensure safe and quality care.

In vetoing SB 1027, SB 1028, HB 5744 and HB 5745, she said the administration and future administrations need to retain the authority to determine whether rules are needed to assure senior citizens and the disabled are receiving safe and quality care by well-trained and adequately compensated employees.

Ms. Granholm also said her veto protects the Executive Branch from encroachment by the Legislative Branch of government.

“If at some point it is determined that administrative rules are needed to assure that workers providing care to senior citizens and the disabled are receiving the wages and benefits necessary to assure quality care and safety, the Administrative Procedures Act of 1969 affords ample opportunity for legislative review and reaction,” she said in her veto letters to the Senate and House.

Sen. Bill Hardiman (R-Kentwood), sponsor of the Senate bills, said his concern was potential favoritism for unionized facilities “at the expense of affordable quality care for vulnerable adults.”

“Michigan families demand that their loved ones have safe, quality care, which is what my legislation tried to ensure. Instead, the governor’s veto means her administration can go forward with costly regulations that would favor facilities with collective-bargaining agreements,” he said.

Published March 27, 2006

Highfields: State review should lend more urgency to reform efforts

A Lansing State Journal editorial

A state review has validated allegations of poor treatment at Highfields' now dormant residential programs for troubled youth. The state Department of Human Services says the Highfields board needs an improvement plan to head off possible sanctions.

The Highfields board says it's working on just such a plan.

That's good. Problem identified. Problem acknowledged. Now, comes correction.

Meanwhile, the teens Highfields was serving for Ingham County and the state remain elsewhere; in situations that might not be conducive to their improvement.

The state Department of Human Services' review of Highfields lends more support for decisions made by Ingham County judges and the state to remove teens from Highfields. Perhaps the rhetoric around this dispute could have been better, but the basic withdrawal decision still appears sound.

That means the matter still rests squarely with the board at Highfields. It was in charge when these state-identified problems developed. Only it can manufacture a response to improve safety and satisfy its clients.

(EDITOR'S NOTE: LSJ Editorial Page Editor Mark Nixon is a member of Highfields' board. To avoid a conflict of interest, Nixon has recused himself from board meetings.)

The board seems to be making the right moves - careful reviews of what happened, consultation with experts from outside its operation. Now it must put in place the right policies and people so that they can once again - hopefully sooner rather than later - have programs that merit the county's and state's trust.

Wayne County juvenile system receives praise

March 25, 2006

BY JACK KRESNAK

FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

Wayne County's juvenile justice system is efficient and has helped keep hundreds of delinquents out of further trouble, according to an independent review released Friday.

The Southfield-based Plante & Moran auditing firm's report appears to put to rest allegations that the county's 6-year-old system was rife with phantom cases for which private agencies were paid exorbitant fees for juvenile delinquents who didn't exist.

"We found no evidence of phantom users in this review," reads the report, which nonetheless recommends stricter security controls for the county's computerized system that generates automated billings.

In its review of fiscal years 2001 to 2005, the firm said Wayne County's share of the costs for caring for children who are abused and neglected has increased nearly 50%, from \$37.5 million in 2001 to \$56.1 million last year, but the number of children in the system has remained about the same.

The increase is due almost totally to cuts in the amount of federal money going to the county. The average number of children in foster care has stayed at roughly 3,100 per year -- and the cost to the state of caring for those kids has not risen, but the county's costs have skyrocketed. Total payments handled by the county agency have risen from \$171.6 million in 2001 to \$187.8 million in 2005, the review said. "Unfortunately, the county doesn't have control over those costs," said Children and Family Services Director Sue Hamilton Smith.

The county plans to put the review on its Web site, www.waynecounty.com, on Monday, a spokeswoman said.

Contact **JACK KRESNAK** at 313-223-4544 or jkresnak@freepress.com

Review results

- The auditing firm Plante & Moran reviewed the \$131-million-a-year Wayne County juvenile justice system managed by the county's Department of Children and Family Services. Key findings:
- Costs for juvenile justice have been reduced nearly 2% since 2001, even though more children are being served. The costs doubled during the 1990s.
- Before the new system began in 2000, more than half of the county's juvenile delinquents were convicted of new felonies within two years of their first arrest. Fewer than 5% of the youths in the program in 2004 have been convicted of new felonies.
- Wayne County's reliance on state training schools such as **the W.J. Maxey Boys Training School** in Green Oak Township -- which costs \$413.54 per day per resident, up from about \$270 five years ago -- has been reduced significantly, from a high of 776 Wayne County kids in 1998 to 23 in 2004.
- More than half of juvenile delinquents committed to the program are assigned to in-home services that cost an average of \$60 per day per child, rather than institutions where costs average \$180.
- The system is run almost entirely by the private sector, with just eight county employees overseeing it. The review recommends the county hire at least four more employees.

Family strife spilling into our courts

Judges can decide cases; they can't fix Mich. families

From William Whitbeck, Chief Judge

Michigan Court of Appeals

Published March 26, 2006

Lansing State Journal

The problem of broken families should frighten anyone who is concerned about children and our state's future. We are moving - indeed, we have moved - from a culture of marriage to a culture of divorce and one-night stands.

Families are fragmenting and are turning for help to our courts in huge numbers. From our vantage point on the bench, we see the dire results and they shock us. No judge, however compassionate and wise, can hope to heal a child who lacks a stable and loving home. No court system, no matter how well run, can cure the underlying social trends that menace our children and our future.

In the information age, statistics overwhelm us. Occasionally, however, we can make some sense out of the data by which we are constantly assailed.

Consider the following data about family cases in our judicial system; these data have remained fairly constant over time and do not appear to be particularly affected by the state's economic situation:

- In 2004, 223,499 new family cases were filed in Michigan's family courts, accounting for almost 67 percent of all circuit court level filings.
- Divorcing couples with children filed 26,761 new cases in 2004.
- More than 800,000 support cases are in Friend of the Court offices. These cases account for roughly 2.5 million people, about one-quarter of the population of Michigan.
- In 2004, there were 15,558 new paternity cases. Nearly half of these child support cases also are paternity cases. In other words, these are cases in which the mother sought a support order and a court had to determine who the child's father was.
- The number of appeals to the Michigan Court of Appeals from lower court decisions terminating parental rights has grown steadily; over the last 10 years, this number has increased by almost 73 percent.

These data tell us our judicial system is changing before our very eyes. Classically, courts conducted civil and criminal trials. Increasingly, however, the judicial system now deals with cases involving broken families.

We should be very clear on one point: while trial and appellate judges can decide such cases, we cannot and do not resolve the issues that bring these families into our courts in the first place.

Of course, our courts are not helpless in the face of this onslaught. For example, a joint Supreme Court/Court of Appeals work group on delays in dependency appeals - those appeals that involve termination of parental rights or a dispute over child custody - pointed out that in 2001, on average, the Court of Appeals disposed of such appeals within 325 days of filing. We have now cut that time to 206 days, a reduction of fully 36 percent.

While this is certainly progress, ultimately the judicial system can only do so much. Our society as a whole must address the underlying trends that send so many Michigan families into the legal system ... and the children are waiting.

Monday, March 27, 2006

Men who pay child support for others' kids secure an ally

Betty DeRamus

The Detroit News

Four years ago, state Rep. Lamar Lemmons III, D-Detroit, saw no reason to rescue or rally around men struggling to pay child support for children who weren't biologically theirs.

However, his attitude changed after men from his district serenaded him with chorus after chorus of the child support blues.

They told him about falling behind on child support payments and never catching up. They told him about spending retirement money on support payments.

And they pointed out that Michigan law was "taking food out of biological children's mouths to feed a child that wasn't theirs."

"They said I had a feminist bias on the issue, and I wasn't looking at it objectively," Lemmons said. "When I did look at it, I had to say in all fairness to them they should not be made to pay for (such children)."

Bill would help men

Bills in the Legislature designed to end this situation include House Bill No. 5088, which Lemmons introduced in August.

Lemmons' bill would withdraw child support orders when DNA tests prove the men aren't the biological fathers. However, it remains in the Committee on Family and Children Services.

Fortunately, that didn't stop Doug Richardson from winning his own long-running child custody case last week.

Richardson, in fact, is the new champion for men paying child support for children who aren't biologically theirs.

On Thursday, he went to court and got his child support payments stopped and what he owes wiped out.

A DNA test had proven that the first son he had with his ex-wife wasn't his. He also had paid child support for 15 years to his ex-wife.

During his court hearing, his ex-wife agreed to drop her child support claim.

All the same, the only way to guarantee simple justice for other fathers supporting children that aren't biologically theirs is to amend Michigan's child support legislation.

Lawmaker wants fairness

Under current Michigan law, a man becomes a legal father when he is married to the mother of a child at conception or birth or signs a voluntary affidavit of parentage.

Lemmons' bill would allow the court to withdraw child support orders if both of the following conditions exist: The man is not the child's adoptive parent, and genetic testing results admitted into evidence prove the man isn't the biological father.

At least 12 other states have passed similar laws.

Lemmons stresses that it's now up to men like the ones who schooled him on the unfairness of the current law to push for discussion and passage of his bill.

He added that men like Richardson "want a hearing and a chance to be heard," he said. "That's how I was converted."

Let's hope Michigan soon becomes one of the states to close this loophole.

No man should have to support a child that isn't biologically his -- unless, of course, it's what his heart desires and his bank account can afford.

You can reach Betty DeRamus at (313) 222-2296 or bderamus@detnews.com

Food bank clients doubles in past five years

March 25, 2006

By Kris Turner

Fint Journal

The Food Bank of Eastern Michigan is serving twice as many people as it did in 2001.

A study released by America's Second Harvest, a nationwide network of food banks, concluded the bank fed 267,078 people in its 22-county service area in 2005.

"The majority of the statistics that were revealed in the 2005 study show that things aren't getting better," said Kara Ross, director of programs and agency relations for the food bank. "The need in our pantries is increasing."

Interviews with food bank workers and surveys yielded the new information. In 2001, the food bank assisted about 130,000 people. Job losses and a troubled economy have pushed more people into neighborhood food pantries and soup kitchens, Ross said.

"Our mobile pantries are growing in popularity," Ross said. "We can distribute food right off the trailer to the people who are right there waiting for it. We will probably look at expanding the program and maybe getting another one."

Feeding more people hasn't been a problem - the organization raised \$526,000 during its holiday campaign - and it now hopes to use some of those funds to reach even more people by using converted beverage trucks to transport food.

Others who staff local kitchens and food distribution centers said they aren't shocked more people are turning out to receive free food.

"The stats are on the rise year after year," said Kelly Frick, director of development for the Catholic Charities of Shiawassee and Genesee counties. "We are, for the most part, breaking even every month and able to meet the needs of the people who come to our door."

The charities run the North End Soup Kitchen, which sees about 300 people each day. Nearly all the food distributed there comes from the Food Bank of Eastern Michigan. Omar Odette, director of the food pantry at Our Lady of Guadalupe Roman Catholic Church in Mt. Morris Township, said he's seen a sharp increase in the number of senior citizens needing assistance.

"Nearly 50 percent of our people are seniors," he said. "I believe our seniors are hurting the worst. They are the ones we don't have programs for. With the prescriptions they have to pay for, it leaves them little money for food."

Aiding about 125 people a week, Odette said most people who visit the pantry are classified as working poor. Nearly 75 percent of all the households served by the food bank make less than \$15,000 a year.

Getting families, especially those with young children, to eat properly can ensure their health and ability to function during the day, Ross said. However, making sure the 37 percent of children who are hungry eat balanced meals isn't easy.

"A lot of times the food that is cheapest at the grocery store is going to be snack foods," she said.

QUICK TAKE

Hunger in Eastern Michigan

The number of people aided by the Food Bank of Eastern Michigan has doubled since 2001. With 267,078 people hungry in the 22 counties it serves, more area pantries and kitchens have to rely on the food bank.

Of the people served by the pantry, nearly 40 percent are children, 75 percent have an income below the poverty level, 26 percent chose between paying for food or housing, and 26 percent chose between getting food or medical care.

Nationwide Hunger

On a national scale, 36 percent are under 18 years of age, 68 percent had incomes below the poverty level, and 35 percent of people chose between paying their mortgage or buying food.

Social worker's license suspended

Saturday, March 25, 2006

Jackson Citizen Patriot

A Jackson social worker has had her master social worker license suspended by the Michigan Department of Community Health after two felony convictions last year in Jackson County Circuit Court.

Judy Ann McNish, 41, was convicted of one felony count of health-care fraud for filing a false claim for payment of health-care benefits against Blue Cross-Blue Shield of Michigan, and one felony count of creating a false prescription form on Nov. 15, according to court records.

She was given a suspended sentence of 180 days in jail and placed on probation for 36 months.

McNish was also ordered to pay costs in the amount of \$6,282 in addition to court fees of \$520, according to court records.

March 8, the MDCH issued an order immediately suspending McNish's license under the Public Health Code, which provides for the mandatory summary suspension of a health professional's license upon conviction of a felony.

Helpers of Katrina victims wait for checks from FEMA

Saturday, March 25, 2006

BY CATHERINE O'DONNELL

Ann Arbor News

After Hurricane Katrina hit in late August, Washtenaw County led a coalition of public and private groups that resettled dozens of families. Together, they spent about \$211,000.

But months later, most haven't received a penny of federal reimbursement.

"It's been really frustrating," said Mike Scholl, coordinator of the county's Human Services Community Collaborative.

Apparently, the reimbursement problem isn't limited to Washtenaw County. Other groups around the country have had trouble getting reimbursements from the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

Washtenaw County has gone back and forth with FEMA representatives in Lansing, who work for the Emergency Management Division of the Michigan State Police. They'd wanted assorted documents, including detailed descriptions of the social services provided. On Tuesday morning, Scholl said, he was told that adding a list of services provided each family would be sufficient. Late last summer, the county teamed with agencies such as POWER Inc., a faith-based human services nonprofit, and Jewish Family Services to help evacuees find local jobs, schools, housing and necessary services. The county also made an oral agreement with McKinley, the national real estate company based in Ann Arbor, whereby McKinley would provide apartments.

Katrina evacuees needed help before the county could write a plan and negotiate it with FEMA, Scholl said. "This was such a different disaster, it required a different response."

Because evacuees would most likely be in Michigan longer than the 72 hours on which most FEMA help is modeled, local planners figured the apartments and the social service agencies would be the best strategy, Scholl said.

But that didn't quite fit FEMA's model, which probably meant the documentation didn't fit, which has led to problems with reimbursement, Scholl said.

"Washtenaw County acted very quickly. We offered housing within a week and a half of Gov. Granholm's request," said Diana Kern, executive vice president and director of residential properties at McKinley. Between September and January, McKinley absorbed about \$95,000 worth of rent in Washtenaw County. In Florida, Indiana and Oklahoma, it absorbed another \$55,000 for a total of \$150,000.

For housing, FEMA reimburses state and local governments and Native American tribes. Or it issues checks to individuals who then pay their landlords. But it doesn't pay private landlords, said Joel Pepper, state coordinating officer for Katrina evacuee assistance.

Actually, Pepper said, he thought McKinley was donating the apartments.

Kern said McKinley willingly donated, assuming it might not be paid for the first several months but that FEMA would eventually mail rent checks.

That didn't happen, Kern said.

FEMA didn't have a plan for moving evacuees into private housing, said Rachel Arnold, spokeswoman for the National Apartment Association. Once it made one, though, it kept changing the guidelines, which has been challenging for apartment owners, Arnold said.

At peak, Scholl said, Washtenaw County worked with about 125 families, a total of 325 people. About 40 families remain in the county, a handful of whom still need help.

At POWER, Housing Manager Efrion Smith said the \$15,000 his agency spent is part of an \$800,000 annual budget. He and other POWER staff members worked with 37 Katrina families, 12 of whom remain in Washtenaw County.

POWER Executive Director Denese Brown is annoyed by the reimbursement problem. "The response FEMA gave us was so absurd."

Both Brown and Anya Abramzon at Jewish Family Services said they willingly offered to help without expecting to be paid, that it's part of their work in the community. But Brown thought FEMA would eventually reimburse the organization.

POWER clients have included people like Glinda Monroe, who arrived in Ann Arbor from Avondale, La., with her two children, 7-year-old Tamia and 9-year-old Theodore. The family lived in a McKinley apartment for several weeks before moving to the Hikone apartments owned and managed by the Ann Arbor Housing Commission.

Monroe said it took multiple phone calls, differing requests for documentation, and one rejection letter before FEMA sent her a \$4,000 check to reimburse McKinley.

At FEMA regional headquarters in Chicago, spokeswoman Gay Ruby said training personnel to deal accurately with hundreds of thousands of calls has been a huge project. "We did much as we could, fast as we could, accurately as we could."

Catherine O'Donnell can be reached at codonnell@annarbornews.com or 734-994-6831.

Lansing State Journal letters

Sex brings duties

Regarding "Man suing for the right to decline fatherhood" (LSJ, March 9):

There is a phrase I have heard, "life finds a way." Even if the woman couldn't have become pregnant (which is apparently wrong), he should have covered all the bases by wearing a condom. He did have a choice. He chose to have sex.

Don't they teach in sex ed that every act of intercourse could result in a pregnancy? "Life finds a way," indeed! He has to support his child.

Monica Riegler-Pecoraro

Lansing

Seek out local care

Regarding the recent article on dentists and Medicaid: With all the cuts to resources and benefits our government has made, it would be nice to have more news outlining the ways we can empower ourselves to become more self-sufficient and seek alternative methods of caring for ourselves.

Here's a valuable tip: Reinvest in our community colleges and universities that have wonderful dental hygiene clinics and medical centers. Lansing Community College, in particular, has a great facility offering services at affordable rates. Not only will you be taking your health into your own hands, but you'll also be facilitating these students' direct-learning experience.

Tara Scott

East Lansing



JENNIFER M. GRANHOLM
GOVERNOR

STATE OF MICHIGAN
DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES
LANSING

MARIANNE UDOW
DIRECTOR

News Release

**Contact: Stepheni Schlinker or
Maureen Sorbet (517) 373-7394**

**Michigan Department of Human Services Summarily Suspends
the Adult Foster Care Large Group Home License of Tricia Parsons, Licensee Designee,
Caring Hands Loving Hearts LLC**

March 27, 2006

The Michigan Department of Human Services (DHS), Office of Children and Adult Licensing issued an order of summary suspension and amended notice of intent to revoke the license of Clinton County adult foster care large group home provider Tricia Parsons, Caring Hands Loving Hearts, 311 Higham, St. Johns, Michigan. (License # AL190248000) This action resulted from a recent investigation of multiple complaints about the adult foster care large group home.

A March 23, 2006, complaint investigation found violations of the Adult Foster Care Facility Licensing Act and/or adult foster care family home promulgated rules requiring "emergency action" under the Michigan Administrative Procedures Act, MCL 24.292(2).

Effective 8:00 a.m., March 27, 2006, the Summary Suspension Order prohibits Tricia Parsons from operating an adult foster care large group home at 311 Higham, St. Johns, Michigan. Accordingly, she may not accept physically handicapped, developmentally disabled, mentally ill and aged adults for care after that date and time. The order also requires Ms. Thatcher to inform all of the guardians of adults in her care that her license has been suspended and that she can no longer provide adult foster care.

Ms. Thatcher has held a license to operate an adult foster care large group home since September 9, 2002. The license was for 19 adults.

Michigan law defines an adult foster care large group home "an adult foster care facility with the approved capacity to receive at least 13 but not more than 20 adults to be provided with foster care."

For more information, consult DHS website at www.michigan.gov/dhs.